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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BAKU 000433

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [ENRG](#) [ETRD](#) [PREL](#) [RS](#) [IZ](#) [TU](#) [AJ](#)  
SUBJECT: AZERBAIJANI DEFENSE MINISTER: SEEKING STRONG  
RELATIONS, MORE U.S. SUPPORT

Classified By: Ambassador Anne E. Derse. Reasons: 1.4 (b, d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: On May 21, the Defense Minister told visiting EUCOM Commander Craddock that Azerbaijan is committed to building strong military relations with the U.S. and NATO. However, the Minister continued, Azerbaijan is under pressure from Iran, Russia and Armenia and requires greater commitment from the United States. He specifically asked the U.S. for weapon sales and enhanced diplomatic engagement to solve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. His talking points coincided almost exactly with the President's. The one exception was a specific request for assistance in the construction of a new naval base to NATO standards. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) EUCOM Commander General Bantz Craddock, accompanied by the Ambassador, POLAD Katherine Canavan, Major General Kisner (SOCEUR) and Major General Schafer met separately with Defense Minister Safar Abiyev on May 21. (Septels report General Craddock's meetings with President Aliyev and Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov.) Abiyev was accompanied by Naval Chief Admiral Sultanov and International Relations Chief General Najafov.

SEEKING NATO STANDARDS  
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13. (C) Abiyev welcomed General Craddock, stating that Azerbaijan, since the early days of its independence, had pursued the policy of building strong ties with NATO and the U.S. Today, U.S.-Azerbaijan relations are approaching "the highest level," including on mil-to-mil cooperation and cooperation with NATO that is expanding year after year. U.S.-Azerbaijani relations are broad, Abiyev said, underscoring that without U.S. support, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline would not have been realized. Azerbaijan's interoperability with NATO is increasing, as it adopts the NATO staff structure. "Since last January, all exercises and training are being conducted to NATO standards, and Azerbaijan is cooperating with NATO nations in conducting joint training," the Defense Minister averred.

14. (C) Azerbaijan has been a strong supporter of the U.S. in fighting terrorism since 2001, allowing the U.S. to "use all of our capabilities." Azerbaijani troops serve in Afghanistan, and served in Kosovo until recently and with the U.S. Marines in Iraq. Azerbaijan recently doubled its troops in Afghanistan.

AZERBAIJAN REMAINS UNDER PRESSURE  
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15. (C) Azerbaijan itself, however, remains under pressure, Abiyev said. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has not been

solved; seventeen years of negotiations have produced no results. The U.S. is a Minsk Group Co-chair and Azerbaijan would like to see the U.S. take "stronger efforts" to produce results in this process. The situation "obliges" Azerbaijan to increase its military capabilities; Azerbaijan "has to be ready to liberate its territories by force."

¶16. (C) NATO and the U.S. should pay more attention to the Caucasus, Abiyev said. Russia and Iran are seeking to hinder Azerbaijani and Caucasus' nations relations with the U.S. and NATO "not only politically, but militarily," as the war in Georgia illustrated. The process of political and military pressure by Russia continues and is increasing in the region. Russia provided \$800 million in arms to Armenia. Although both Russia and Armenia deny it, the equipment is in the occupied territories. As long as Azerbaijani territories are occupied, peace in the Caucasus is not possible. "We demand that Armenia withdraw and IDP's be allowed to return," Abiyev said.

¶17. (C) General Craddock told Abiyev that the Caucasus is a key geo-strategic region for the U.S., NATO and the world in the 21st Century. The U.S. is encouraged by our mil-to-mil cooperation, which we plan to increase in the future, working closely with Azerbaijan. This is not easy; the political situation affects what we seek to accomplish in mil-to-mil relations. The U.S. needs to understand Azerbaijan's strategic vision and, to the extent we can, work together. The possibility for friction and conflict exists in the Caucasus. EUCOM will focus more effort on Azerbaijan and the region, and NATO will as well, largely due to Afghanistan.

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The U.S. appreciates Azerbaijan's contributions in Afghanistan, Kosovo and Iraq, which we know entails political costs, Craddock said. He added that he appreciates the difficulty of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and hopes diplomacy will succeed. Although it may be slow, it is the right process to achieve a resolution. We should stop those who seek to derail it or prevent its successful conclusion.

¶18. (C) Responding with respect to Azerbaijan's strategic vision, Abiyev said that Azerbaijan has declared its desire for and is working towards a strategic partnership with the U.S. Azerbaijan is also enhancing its partnership with Europe. Azerbaijan's future directions depend to a large extent on U.S. policy, European policy and NATO policy toward Azerbaijan. All these partners verbally assert that they support Azerbaijan. "But these are words -- in practice, no (support is evident)." Hence the GOAJ is concerned. Georgia and the Ukraine, for example, declared their intention to join NATO, and "you see the results . . . the situation in the Ukraine has worsened, and in Georgia, no one helped them in August. Russian troops went to Tbilisi, they destroyed the Georgian armed forces, and the political situation in Georgia is tense as well. "

¶19. (C) "If the U.S. and Europe would accept Azerbaijan and Georgia as NATO members, we wouldn't face this situation," Abiyev stated. Instead, the U.S. attaches more importance to Armenia. This, he said, "is a mistake." General Ralston and Secretary Rumsfeld, in the past, delivered "great messages" to the U.S. Congress on the importance of relations with Azerbaijan, but today no one is making this case. Contacts at the Pentagon tell the GOAJ that "the Pentagon is trying, but State imposes obstacles."

¶10. (C) Abiyev said that Azerbaijan relies on former Soviet- and Russian-produced equipment for its defense. Russia equips Armenia with no one's permission, but Azerbaijan receives "not one bullet" from the U.S. Where is the substance in the U.S.-Azerbaijan partnership, he asked. "We would like to see changes." It is difficult for Azerbaijan to allocate peacekeeping forces with 70 percent of its troops on the front line. The U.S. has spent "\$10 billion" in support of Armenia since independence, and much less on

Azerbaijan.

¶11. (C) Abiyev said Azerbaijan has closed its airspace to Russian military flights to Armenia and is urging Georgia to do the same. This will affect Russian and Armenian armed forces. Azerbaijan would like to see greater U.S. support -- Azerbaijan must have joint work with and open relations with both the U.S. and NATO, and there must be "positive results" from this cooperation. Moreover, if Azerbaijan and Georgia are assured true independence, Armenia will turn west and detach itself from Russia. But this is not possible today, when Russia is supplying Armenia through Iran, and the U.S. is pressuring Turkey to open the border. Only Russia and Armenia benefit from opening of the Turkey-Armenia border, and "Russia will never let it happen if it is negative for Russian interests."

¶12. (C) Abiyev said that the Ministry of Defense wants to build a new base for the Navy. The U.S. says it cannot provide weapons, but we have cooperation under the Caspian Maritime Security program. Azerbaijan seeks USG assistance to establish a new base that meets NATO standards. General Craddock replied that a security cooperation agreement between the U.S. and Azerbaijan would be a positive step, for which he would advocate in Washington. This would send a strong signal that "there are implications" to anyone who would make mischief in the region. The U.S. and Azerbaijan should establish a dialogue to work towards an agreement. After many years of focus primarily on Afghanistan and Iraq, the new U.S. Administration and the new NATO Secretary General, with a new strategic concept, will be re-examining issues in the Caucasus. Thus, both bilaterally and multilaterally, there should be new prospects for cooperation. The U.S. and Azerbaijan must work together to make this happen; it is a two-way street. Abiyev agreed, underscoring that Azerbaijan has always "expended maximum effort" to build closer cooperation with the U.S. and NATO, and further developing cooperation must indeed be a "two-way street."

COMMENT

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¶13. (C) The Defense Minister provided the obligatory lecture on Armenian intransigence on the Nagorno-Karabakh and Turkey-Armenia reconciliation question. For Abiyev, however, it was the abridged lecture. Instead, he echoed strongly and with greater specificity President Aliyev's message of seeking greater security engagement with the West. Abiyev now regularly asks senior American visitors about weapons sales. The Embassy has encouraged his staff to work with the Office of Defense Cooperation to identify items to purchase of a purely defensive character, rather than the many lethal, high-tech items in which the Ministry has so far expressed interest.

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